

A New Culture Needs a New Education

Published in November, 2006

The transition to a postmodern culture will bring about significant changes in all areas of society. Our ways of thinking about healing, spirituality, food, community, the natural world, and even economics and business are, in a broad sense, turning from the materialism and reductionism of the industrial age to a more organic, holistic, person-centered and locally rooted worldview. It is no accident that modern educational institutions are similarly being challenged by alternative ways of teaching and learning. The system of schooling as we know it, with its grading, testing, standardized curriculum, and control over students' use of time, reflects the mechanistic worldview of the age now beginning to decline. Parents and educators who are beginning to question this worldview have turned to diverse philosophies and methods, from Montessori and Waldorf schools, to democratic schools, home education and community learning centers, among others.

This is a confusing time in education. Public schools are driven into even further standardization and desperate competition by the so-called No Child Left Behind policy of the federal government. Conservative politicians call for privatization and voucher schemes. Some see charter schools (publicly funded but independently run) as the ideal model. And well over a million families are keeping their children out of school altogether, for all sorts of reasons. Until this generation, most parents simply sent their kids to the neighborhood school, but now we are faced with a dizzying array of choices, with little understanding of their philosophical differences. In this article I will provide a brief overview of the field of holistic education and list some of its distinctive examples.

Simply stated, holistic education is an effort to cultivate the development of the whole human being. Where conventional schooling views the child as a passive receiver of information and rules, or at most as a computer-like processor of information, a holistic approach recognizes that to become full person, a growing child needs to develop—in addition to intellectual skills—physical, psychological, emotional, interpersonal, moral and spiritual potentials. The child is not merely a future citizen or employee in training, but an intricate and delicate web of vital forces and environmental

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influences. Ultimately, holistic education reflects a spiritual rather than a mechanistic worldview; it recognizes that in the growth of every child, some mysterious life force is unfolding and seeking expression. This force might be understood in religious or quasi-religious terms, as in Waldorf education, or it can be seen in a more naturalistic sense, as a biological urge—a worldview that makes sense to many progressive and democratic educators. In any case, a holistic approach to education respects this life force and seeks to nourish it. Clearly this worldview is very closely aligned with the impulse behind organic agriculture, natural medicine, ecological awareness, and other areas of the emerging “green” society.

A holistic education is usually characterized by several core qualities. First, it encourages experiential learning. There is more discussion, questioning, experimentation, and active engagement in a holistic learning environment, and a noticeable absence of grading, testing, labeling, and comparing. Learning is more meaningful and relevant to students—it matters to their lives. Second, personal relationships are considered to be as important as academic subject matter. These learning environments strive to cultivate a sense of community and belonging, and qualities of safety, respect, caring, and even love. Third, there is concern for the interior life, for the feelings, aspirations, ideas and questions that each student brings to the learning process. Education is no longer viewed as the transmission of information; instead it is a journey inward as well as outward into the world. Fourth, holistic education expresses an ecological consciousness; it recognizes that everything in the world exists in context, in relationship to inclusive communities. This involves a deep respect for the integrity of the biosphere, if not a sense of reverence for nature. It is a worldview that embraces diversity, both natural and cultural. Holistic education shuns ideology, categorization, and fixed answers, and instead appreciates the flowing interrelatedness of all life.

These core qualities are practiced in diverse ways. Montessori schools provide a carefully designed, multiage “prepared environment” that encourages children to explore and experiment according to their own pace and interests. Waldorf teachers lead classes through a curriculum meant to respond to the stage of soul development of each age group, using stories and arts. “Democratic” or “free” schools, and many homeschoolers,

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seek to remove all adult obstacles to children's curiosity and spontaneous community. Progressive educators encourage young people to examine the world with a critical eye and a commitment to social justice. And there are a few holistic schools based on particular spiritual traditions (Quaker or yogic, for example) that bring centering practices such as meditation into their classrooms. I will describe these different models in more detail in later columns.

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